

The Short Goodbye

Acts 20:1 March 22, 2023

The inhabitants of Cherry Tree Lane had no idea how much life would change after Mary Poppins showed up. She came as a servant, but led the Banks family and others into a new, transformed experience of joy and fulfillment. At the end of the classic Disney movie, the family doesn't see Mary go - they're happily flying kites in the park with broad smiles. Her salty umbrella parrot says, "That's gratitude for you - they didn't even say goodbye!"

In Acts 20, after more than 2 years of daily service, leadership, and friendship, Paul was leaving the city of Ephesus. The circumstances weren't as charming as a bunch of Brits flying kites in the park - a huge riot had engulfed the city in chaos. But, on his way out, Paul didn't slip away unnoticed. He met with his Christian brothers and sisters who would stay behind in this turbulent position.

Tonight, I'd like us to put ourselves in the Ephesians' position. We can't know what they were thinking, but we can guess what we might be thinking. What we'll find is that this group of faithful Christians faced a lot of earthly uncertainty, but Paul was confident they could experience the kind of strength and peace and unity that only comes from the transformative power of the Gospel.

In Acts 20, verse 1 we read:

Acts 20:1 - After the uproar was over, Paul sent for the disciples, encouraged them, and after saying farewell, departed to go to Macedonia.

Ephesus was a major city on the western coast of Turkey. Its population was 250,000.¹ It was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world - the temple of Artemis (or your Bible might call her Diana, which was her Roman name). Not only was this a religious site, it was also a bank, a refuge, and a civic center.²

But Ephesus wasn't only home to Artemis worship. There was the Roman Emperor cult and a variety of Greek religious cults, as well as what are called "Hero" cults. There was widespread practice of the occult. One scholar writes, "*Ephesus, the third largest city in the Empire, was by far the most hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all sorts.*"³

Paul arrived into this dark city sometime around 52 A.D.⁴ The next 2 to 3 years were jam packed with ministry and miracles and evangelism and opposition. Among the enemies of the Gospel there was hardened animosity. Paul described it as fighting wild beasts in 1 Corinthians. Within the local Church, there was some confusion, particularly in the early days. Paul would discuss and instruct believers *every day* for two years. During these days, we read reports of savage demonic

¹ Gary Gromacki *The Spiritual War For Ephesus*

² *The Temple Of Artemis At Ephesus* The Classical Outlook Vol. 22, No. 7

³ B. M. Metzger, *St. Paul and the Magicians*

⁴ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

activity and widespread economic and social upheaval as people abandoned their old ways of life and embraced the Word of God, which set them free.

Paul's time in Ephesus culminated in a city-wide riot that lasted for hours before the people finally dispersed. Paul didn't leave *because* of the riot - he had already determined to head to Jerusalem by way of Greece - but that's the backdrop of the short goodbye in chapter 20, verse 1.

"After the uproar was over."

The rioters went home, but the phrase here is interesting. Because, Luke (our author) doesn't use the word that means "finished," he uses one that means "restrained."⁵ It's a less final word. In fact, it's the word we get "pause" from.

The uproar wasn't boiling over *at the moment*, but the enemies of the Gospel were influential, motivated, and ready to do some damage. Some of the Jews in the city were slandering Christianity⁶ and the local Gentile union was convinced that Christians were going to ruin the city.⁷ The riot died down but the turmoil wasn't resolved. There were still threats of legal action,⁸ still slander, still resentment, still fake news about what Christianity was all about. Add to that the simmering racial tension that was ingrained in the ancient Roman and Jewish cultures in that era.⁹

Now imagine you're an Ephesian Christian. Often as I read through Acts, I put myself in the place of the characters we know - Paul and Timothy and Luke and Barnabas. We follow their stories and find wonderful application from how God moved in their lives - that's a good thing. But tonight, we're *Ephesians*. When Paul leaves for the next place, we go back home into the tensions and stresses that I've just listed out. *If* you still have a job, most of your coworkers aren't believers. If you were ethnically Jewish, your Jewish friends and family who have rejected the Gospel have cut you off from the synagogue and from fellowship with them. If you were a Gentile believer, well, life looks a lot different now than it did before you were saved. You're not doing the pagan things anymore. You're getting rid of books and idols and your whole social calendar has changed.

So there you are, with all that *personal* strain among family and friends and your field of employment. And *now* the general feeling around town is that Christians are a big problem. Christians are destroying the economy. Christians are deceiving the public. Christians have brought this great city to the verge of "ruin." Luke describes the climate this way: "About that time there was a **major disturbance** about the Way."¹⁰

What did it mean to be a Christian in Ephesus? And what would it mean now that Paul, the *Apostle*, the leader and spiritual father, was leaving? How long would it be until *another* riot broke out?

⁵ *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* for Strong's G5055 & G3973

⁶ Acts 19:9

⁷ Acts 19:25-27

⁸ Acts 19:39

⁹ Gromacki

¹⁰ Emphasis added

"Paul sent for the disciples."

Paul wasn't driven out of Ephesus - he left of his own free will - but it seems like he was keeping a low profile.¹¹ He wasn't hiding, but he wasn't making a big, public statement in his departure as he had in the city of Philippi.

Paul felt compelled to travel back through the region to minister to the other churches he had established. But he wasn't just on to the next thing. Maybe you know people who are always doing something new and sometimes that means they sort of leave your friendship behind. That's not what Paul was doing. He was thinking of these Ephesian believers and wanted to squeeze one more ounce of ministry out on their behalf as he packed up to go.

When Paul sent for them, we can see a contrast and a choice. The contrast is between this group of Christians and the group of craftsmen that had assembled in chapter 19. There, Demetrius had gathered the other craftsmen and silversmiths and incited their hate and their rage and their jealousy, leading to violence. The Christians assembled together were completely the opposite. This was a group dedicated to truth and peace and unity and the benefit of not only their friends, but also their enemies.

Maybe at some point you've belonged to a fraternal order. Fraternal order of firefighters or Eagle Scouts or Sons of Italy. Acts 19 and 20 show two brotherhoods in Ephesus. You had the craftsmen, dedicated to their own wealth at the expense of others and then the Disciples, who were dedicated to the transformation of lives and communities through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul's sending for them didn't only show us a contrast, it also shows that the Believers would have to make a *choice* that day. After everything that happened, knowing all that was going on, when Paul sent up the signal flare, *would you go and meet with him?* Would you say, "Yes, I'm *still* a Christian, even though that might cost me something." The question was, "Am I a disciple, or am I just a person who thinks some things about God?"

Now, remember, these were people who hadn't been Christians very long. Maybe a few years at the oldest. Some were probably brand new in their faith. But spiritual strength is available on day one of your spiritual life. The power to walk worthy of the calling is not withheld until you get a master's of divinity. God provides it now. We never stop learning - that's what the word *disciple* means: pupil or learner - but power for living and grace for today has been delivered to you even if you're a brand new Christian in a violently pagan city like Ephesus.

"[Paul] encouraged them."

¹¹ Ben Witherington *The Acts Of The Apostles*

Ben Witherington writes, *"It was Paul's practice to reinforce and strengthen churches he... founded."*¹²

When it says he encouraged them it doesn't mean he gave them pabulum or cliches. He exhorted them and comforted them. He gave them authoritative words that built them up and made them strong in the Lord.

Spiritual strength was important to Paul. In Romans 1 he says, "I very much want to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you." He talks about the spiritual strength of God's people in Romans, 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians. In Colossians 2 he says walking with God is meant to be rooted and built up in [Christ] and established in the faith. The New Testament assumes that you and I will be weak in eyes of the unbelieving world but strong in the power of our God.

So the Ephesians come together and Paul has to give them the hard news that he's leaving. They won't have an apostle with them anymore. *But*, he reminds them of the truths of God's power and their faith and that they do not have to have an apostle with them at all times in order to live the Christian life. That's good because we don't have apostles anymore! Now, apostles were necessary to establish the Church - God used their lives and teaching as a foundation - but now it is the "regular" disciples who take up the call and follow after the Lord wherever He has scattered them.

Where it says Paul encouraged them, the term comes from a Greek word maybe you've heard before: *parakletos*. It means "one called, or sent for to assist another; an advocate, one who pleads the cause of another."¹³ "Paul, how are you going to advocate for us, how are you going to come along side and help us if you're *leaving*?" Well, for one thing, even though the Church is scattered around the world, we're still united in Christ. More importantly, after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Father sent us another Helper, the Holy Spirit, Who the New Testament calls "The Paraclete."

So, even though it would've been a hard loss when Paul left, he was able to remind them that a greater Helper was staying behind to build them up and strengthen them day by day. His help was *much* better than Paul's. During the riot, Paul wasn't able to do *anything* to help. But the Holy Spirit has omnipotent power and He will be with us forever.¹⁴

"After saying farewell, [Paul] departed to go to Macedonia."

As Mary Poppins floated away, Bert says, *"Goodbye, Mary Poppins. Don't stay away too long!"* She came back 54 years later for the sequel. These Ephesians didn't know it, but most of them would never see Paul again. They would hear from him in 5 years or so when he wrote his letter to them,¹⁵ but now their spiritual father, their pastor, their teacher, and friend was heading out. I imagine it would've been easy to think, "What are we going to do without Paul?" But then they would only

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/parakletos>

¹⁴ John 14:16

¹⁵ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

have to remember what God had *already* done in their midst. How the Lord had saved them from the chains of sin. How He had freed their minds from the perversity and the lies and the waste that they had been steeped in before they were saved. How the Holy Spirit had filled their hearts and many of them had prophesied. How God had provided places for them to gather and answers to their questions and joy for their hearts. How they had already seen God accomplishing His good purposes in and through them day by day, even as opposition increased. How the Word of God was “spreading and prevailing” all around them.¹⁶

It would've been hard to say goodbye, but their spiritual future wasn't dependent on Paul's presence. The Lord was still with them and it was *His* presence that mattered most.

I don't mean to suggest that we face the kind of pressures that a first-century Christian did in pagan Ephesus. We don't see blatant, violent persecution against Christians where we live. But, we *do* live in a culture that is increasingly hostile to the Lord and His Word. We live in a land of divisions and riots and upheaval. We live in a land of cults and belligerent fraternities and perversion. And here God has scattered us to the praise of His glory. Here, in 21st century America, God's intention is to make us spiritually strong and then speak through our lives so that others who are currently lost and trapped in sin might be set free and transformed by the Gospel.

We still have our Helper, the Holy Spirit, with us forever, instructing us and renewing us and bearing witness about Christ. We need to be a people who understand the days in which we live and understand what our place in this world is. For one thing, our place is “passing through.” But for another, our place is witnesses, being holy priests, lights in the dark, preachers of righteousness, disciples who go and make more disciples.

God has called us into this Christian life and placed us into this local community. We are able to enjoy His spiritual strength even during upheaval because the Lord is with us and will be with us until the end.

¹⁶ Acts 19:20